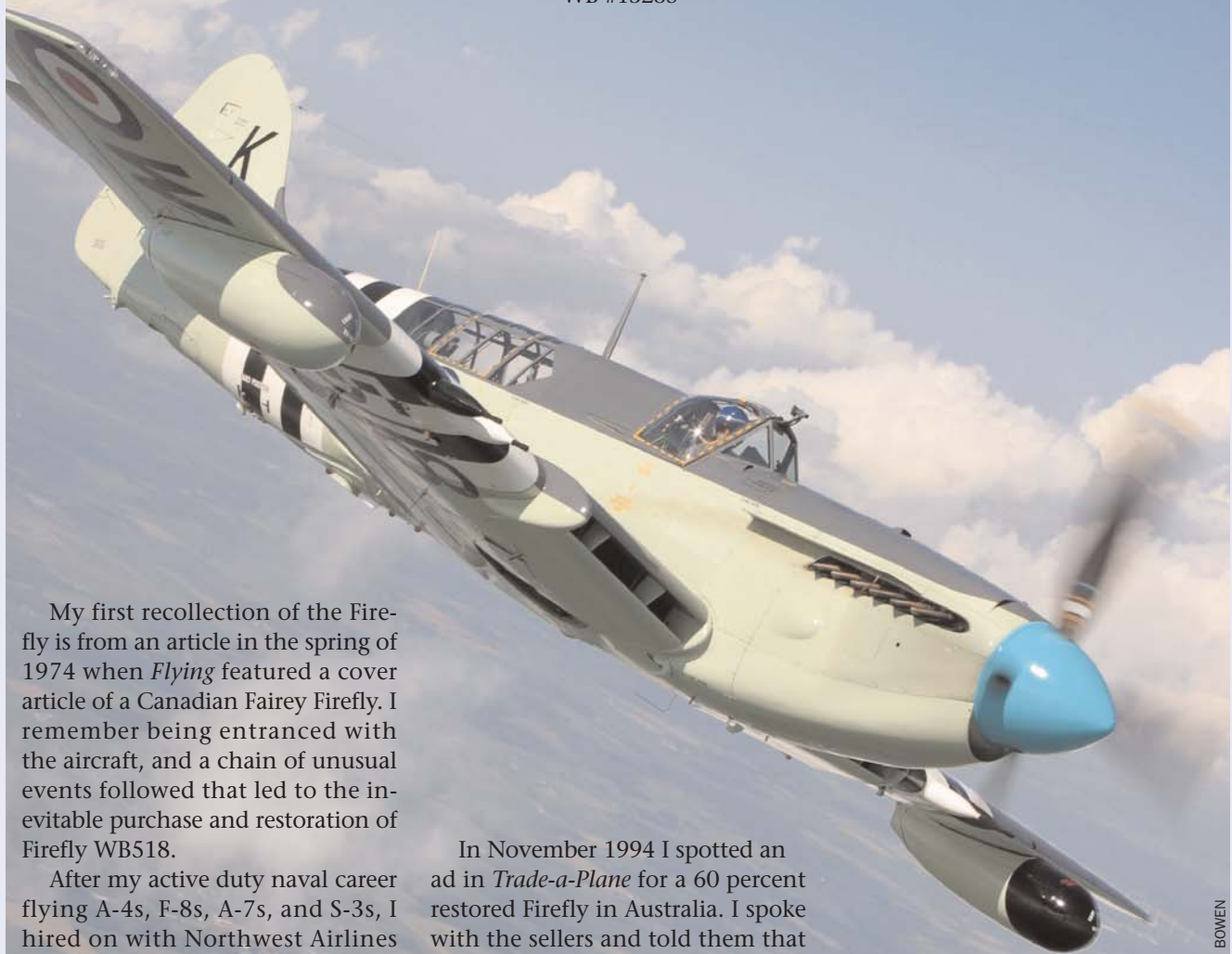


Journey from Oz

Newly restored Australian Fairey Firefly enchants crowd

EDDIE KURDZIEL
WB #13285



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My first recollection of the Firefly is from an article in the spring of 1974 when *Flying* featured a cover article of a Canadian Fairey Firefly. I remember being entranced with the aircraft, and a chain of unusual events followed that led to the inevitable purchase and restoration of Firefly WB518.

After my active duty naval career flying A-4s, F-8s, A-7s, and S-3s, I hired on with Northwest Airlines but continued to fly the Lockheed S-3 in the reserves in San Diego. While flying in San Diego I had the opportunity to fly with two pilots on exchange from Australia, who I managed to stay in touch with even long after they had gone. My wife was also an Australian model and television personality, giving me a link to the land "down under" that proved very beneficial.

In November 1994 I spotted an ad in *Trade-a-Plane* for a 60 percent restored Firefly in Australia. I spoke with the sellers and told them that if the aircraft was as they said, I would buy it sight unseen! I asked restoration expert Ray Middleton if he'd be interested in doing the restoration, and we flew to Australia to pack up the aircraft. We finished on Easter Sunday 1995, shipping two containers and the aircraft fuselage on a Russian freighter. When the fuselage and containers arrived in Fort Collins,

Colorado, where the Firefly would be restored, the shipping amounted to more than \$55,000. Ouch! I was already over budget, and I hadn't even started.

An Eight-Year Journey

Australia's Classic Aviation had already begun restoration on Fire-



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fly WB518, which essentially came off a pole in Griffith, Australia, where it had served as a memorial to airmen. The town council agreed to swap WB518's fuselage with that of a damaged wreck, WD828, that Classic Aviation had purchased. Since the wings, tail, and other parts came from WD828, some people call WB518 a composite restoration of the two aircraft, but nothing could be further from the truth. The starboard wing bears a 1948 date stamp and is probably a Mark IV or early Mark V component. The port wing carries a 1951 date, the tail plane is dated 1946, and the starboard flap and the wingtips also bear dates before either WB518 or WD828 were constructed.

When I purchased WB518, it was partially stripped and disassembled, basically thousands of parts in boxes with no directions. I had purchased a giant one-to-one scale model! It took almost 1.5 years of my spare time and lots of volunteers to complete a fairly comprehensive inventory. We would pick up the "unknown" part, find the part number, look it up in the parts manual, write it down on the inventory, and place it in a numbered box. I spent the next eight years traveling the world buying and trading for the parts I desperately needed to complete my restoration. (I now have enough spares to keep the machine



running for years to come!)

Early in the restoration I had to decide to what detail the aircraft would be restored. At first all I wanted was a flying restoration and nothing more. Patience was not one of my virtues then, and I was only interested in flying, not fixing. However, I began to move the goal posts according to the chief restorer, Tim Fries. It was a logical yet expensive decision to pay now rather than later, so we did a preventive total rebuild on everything. This required "undoing" all the previous restoration work done in Australia on my 60 percent restored project.

Exchanging several parts with the Royal Australian Naval Historic Flight and the Australian Museum of Flight at Nowra allowed me to finish my project while also helping support WD826—their flying Firefly. We fabricated, inspected, and restored the old parts to new for our flying machine. It became apparent why a museum static display is only a fraction of the cost of a machine that is to fly, as a tremendous amount of work had to be done!

As time passed, thoughts of flying became only a dim glow on the horizon. The light at the end of the



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tunnel always seemed to be another oncoming train. To others the plane was merely a figment of my imagination: After all, didn't I say it was going to be at Oshkosh for the last three years? I decided not to allow any media photos or press during restoration. We toiled away in relative secrecy except for my own big mouth.

Six years into the journey my girlfriend asked a question that changed my point of view, "Did you ever consider that this project is more important to the people that work for you than it is to you?" That simple question opened a whole new world for me not only in relation to the airplane, but also to how I viewed my place in life. The closer the aircraft came to completion the more I began to realize it did not belong to me! Men come



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and go, but the machines remain the vestiges of times gone by. It was obvious that I had invested a great deal of time and money to simply become a custodian.

The Firefly Flies!

WB518 was one of the first 10 MK VIs built that still retains the earlier fuselage of the MK V. The aircraft was originally delivered to Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) 817 Squadron, which then exchanged its Fireflys for those of 816 Squadron for duty in Korea. I painted WB518 to represent WB377, which was loaned to 817 Squadron aboard HMAS Sydney by the Royal Australian Navy for duty in Korea.

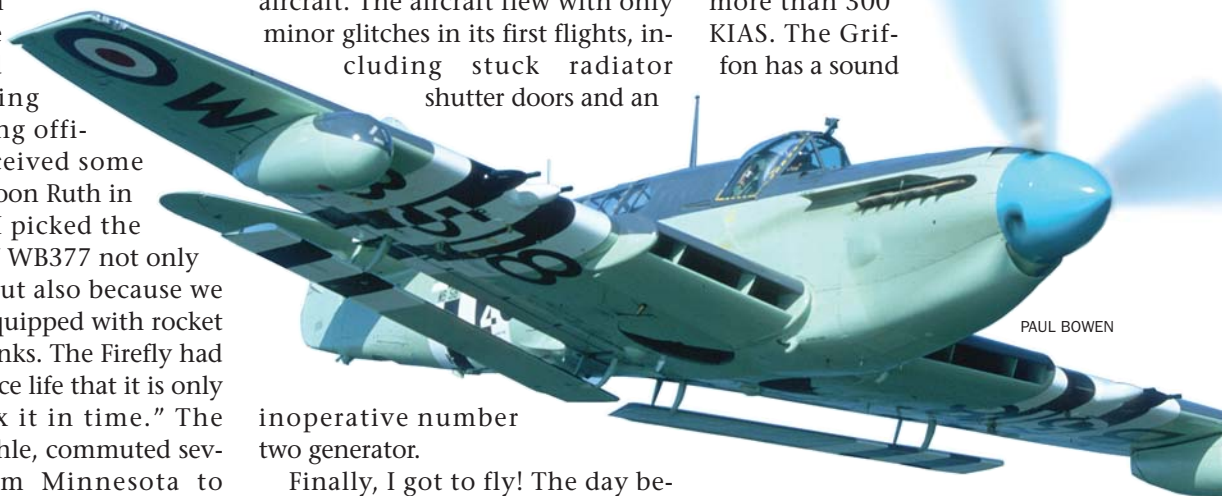
Most of the Australian aircraft were damaged in accidents or due to weather, and WB377, sporting the commanding officer's colors, received some damage in Typhoon Ruth in October 1951. I picked the wartime guise of WB377 not only for aesthetics, but also because we were similarly equipped with rocket rails and drop tanks. The Firefly had such a long service life that it is only possible to "fix it in time." The painter, Ron Mahle, commuted several times from Minnesota to Colorado to complete the striking scheme, which duplicates even the luster. Ian Huntley generously provided the finishing info.

With the painting nearly complete, we finished last minute mechanical work to allow the Grifon V-12 engine to roar back to life. Australian native Kevin Arditto (see sidebar) obtained many of the important cockpit details such as flare pistols, compasses, and relief tubes that I find so intriguing.

When it came time to flight test the aircraft, people thought I might do it due to my flight test experience in the Navy, but I asked Don Sigournay, former commanding officer of the Royal Australian Navy Historic Flight, to make the first flights instead. I was personally too close to make unbiased decisions in the early flight tests, and I lacked the experience in testing this type of aircraft. The aircraft flew with only minor glitches in its first flights, including stuck radiator shutter doors and an

toric Flight in its conversion syllabus and is a fairly good simulator, offering a similar view. The Firefly is much heavier than the T-6 and quite jet-like when it comes to handling the power during landing and approach. With power off and gear down, it sinks like a soda machine!

The Firefly cruises at just over 200 KIAS (knots indicated airspeed), which puts it on par with other aircraft of the period like the Spitfire and P-51 Mustang. On the way to Oshkosh in company with Bill Greenwood's TrMK9 Spitfire, the Firefly consumed nearly twice the fuel at every stop. The Firefly is quite impressive during flybys, especially at speeds more than 300 KIAS. The Grifon has a sound



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inoperative number two generator.

Finally, I got to fly! The day before my first flight in the Firefly, I made more than 40 landings from the backseat of a T-6 Texan. The T-6 is also used by the Royal Navy His-

like no other, and it is deafening in the front cockpit if the occupant does not wear hearing protection. The engine produces oppressive



heat, especially with high outside air temperatures, and requires constant trimming for any power change. Typical of navy fighters of the era, the Firefly possesses optimized performance below 15,000 feet for fleet defense and

has maneuver flaps that can be extended to the cruise position for loiter capability. It also has a high-speed dash capability, but you really pay for it in terms of fuel consumption. Its entry speeds for aerobatics are a clue to its performance: 350 KIAS for entry into an upward roll.

Just a few systems items have

been changed from the original for safety purposes. Modern micro circuit breakers sit inside the original fuse boxes, but with the covers on, you wouldn't see a change. The attitude indicator is from a T-38 Talon, and the HSI compass system is from a C-130 Hercules. All of the flight instruments are electric with the exception of the original vacuum-powered turn and bank. The modern radios are all removable, and a substitute original panel can cover their space. The windscreen de-icing switch has been removed and in that space an RMI (radio magnetic indicator), standby horizon, G-meter, and a digital fuel flow analyzer have been substituted. I also installed a modern pressure demand oxygen system in both cockpits.

Everything else is original, and it all works, including the gyro gun sight and UV lights (although when flying, I replace the gun sight with a color moving-map GPS). The aircraft retains the original airbrakes on the stick, which were strange at first, but they work okay once you get used to them. It was very disconcerting at first to run up the power without depressing the tops of the rudder pedals with my toes!

The End or the Beginning?

It has been especially rewarding for me to see how much pleasure the Firefly has brought to others, especially to those that have never seen one before. You hear all kinds of comments: twin naval Mustang conversion, naval Spitfire, and more. It has been great to share an important piece of history, especially with the younger generations. I even had one person ask if the Australians had fought on the side of the North Koreans in the Korean War!

To all of you who helped in the Firefly's restoration, I can never thank you enough for everything you have contributed to this project! WB518 looks and sounds great back in the air again!



KEN DAWSON

Kevin Arditto— Original Firefly Mechanic

By Ken Dawson, WB #7134

One of "Capt. Eddie" Kurdziel's major supporters during his Firefly restoration, retired RAAF mechanic Kevin Arditto from Lara, Australia, actually serviced the aircraft more than 30 years ago. In researching his aircraft's background and records, Eddie discovered that Kevin had worked on WB518 between 1961 and 1966, during the last years that it was in service (the type went into production in late 1943).

Eddie desperately needed original and newly manufactured parts and pieces to complete his restoration, and Kevin was able to locate many such items, such as exhaust flange gaskets and component seals, some in original boxes! In addition to reconditioning the intricate "fishtail" exhaust stacks, Kevin acquired a complete, original set of Australian military surplus manuals for the external color paint schemes and stenciling for the Fairey Firefly as well as a number of manuals on particular components. Eddie was so grateful for the Aussie's help that he invited Kevin to attend EAA AirVenture Oshkosh. Kevin was often on hand at the Firefly and answered many questions concerning the aircraft and its background. Kevin said that the most often asked question was, "Is this a Spitfire?"